

Youth Advocacy Center: A Model to Change the Lives of Transitioning Urban Youth

By Marisa Policastro

Background and Need for a Model to Assist Transitioning Urban Youth

The Youth Advocacy Center in Greenwich Village, NY was initially founded by Betsy Krebs and Paul Pitcoff, two lawyers working with foster care teens, in an effort to more directly and thoroughly serve this population. It evolved into a training center for teens aging out of the foster care system, and eventually into the distributor of a nationally recognized program of self-advocacy for these teens.

Statistics On Teens in Foster Care Demonstrate System Failures

Each year, 25,000 teens age out of foster care systems of cities and municipalities across the United States. Over 1,000 of these teens are from New York City. In 1999 New York City had close to 10,000 children in foster care between the ages of 13 and 19, with an additional 500 20-year-olds (CCRS Data, 2000). 4,200 of the teens in this population had independent living as a permanency goal, leaving over 5,000 with alternate plans such as reunification with family members or adoption (NYC Administration for Children's Services, 2001). The majority of these teens are housed in group homes, a large number are in foster homes, and less than 600 find themselves in a living situation that offers the possibility of adoption (NYC Administration for Children's Services, 2001). As these teens often emerge from the system uneducated, financially under-supported, and likely facing homelessness and incarceration, it is clear that the current independent living programs available to them are insufficient and failing.

Legislative Response Inadequate

The Foster Care Independence Act of 1999, the most recent piece of federal legislation dealing with teens in foster care, was written with an explicit focus on the systemic problems that exist with regard to teens aging out. Some of the Act's specific goals were to create more

efficient and successful transitional living programs for teens still before they aged out of the system, to extend Medicaid coverage for teens and young adults who have aged out, and to expand the reach of the foster care system to provide benefits for more teens (Mendez & Vandervort, 2001). Though the act requires "an extensive program of education, training, employment, and financial support for young adults leaving foster care", which is meant to start several years before the teens enter high school and continue until independence has been established or the teen has reached 21 years of age, the act does not outline specific criteria or curricula for these independent living programs. It is interesting to note, however, that sex education and substance abuse education are only mentioned as a small subsection of the training these teens are supposed to receive, yet many foster teens complain that these topics are the predominant, if not the sole focus of the independent living programs that they have had access to, as opposed to educational training, job skills, and personal finance management (Foster Care Independence Act 1999). This lack of structure and specific requirements leaves a great deal of discretion for state and local governments to create, test, and administer various programming for transitioning youth. With few examples of best practices and a lack of innovative and successful programs to use as models, the likelihood of these programs achieving their objectives is significantly reduced. In this sense the Act sets goals for states to strive for, but without providing them with a plan for achieving those goals.

An integral part of the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 is a set of regulations regarding the implementation of the FCIA known as the John H. Chafee Independence Program (Foster Care Independence Act 1999). This legislation replaced the Title IV-E Independent Living Initiative of 1986, and was intended to provide additional federal funds for these programs. The Chafee program allows the use of up to 30% of the funds to provide housing for teens age 18-

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21. The program also creates a new class of Medicaid participants, making teens transitioning out of foster care eligible for coverage. However, like many other states, New York State has not opted to exercise that option, leaving system teens to attempt to qualify on their own, which is very difficult. These emerging young adults don't always have the information or access to resources necessary to begin the qualification process and ensure that they have health coverage. Additionally, health coverage tends to be an issue that these teens would only consider if there was a problem, as opposed to viewing healthcare from a maintenance perspective.

A New Initiative for Change

"He gave me a little smile. 'Look, I may be a runaway, group home kid, whatever, but I know I'm going to need a high school degree! Just 'cause I'm in this situation now doesn't mean I'm some idiot. I want to go to college. To do that, I got to finish high school right? And to do that I got to be in high school!'" (Krebs & Pitcoff, 2006, p. 35).

Years of working as lawyers representing children in the foster care system in various legal proceedings led Betsy Krebs and Paul Pitcoff to branch off in search of different way to help these kids and to involve community members and local child welfare workers in their efforts. They opened the Youth Advocacy Center in 1992, starting with a search for funding to work on projects that would involve direct interaction with foster kids. The first project, a video entitled Listen To Us, showed a view of the foster care system from the perspective of a child growing up within it, and was created to influence people in a position to change the system such as policymakers, practitioners, and students pursuing careers in the child welfare system. Once it was produced, teens that Krebs and Pitcoff had recruited as youth advocates made presentations to graduate school students throughout New York City, as well as professional panels and conferences.

The next project involved the production of the Rights and Advocacy Guidelines, a guidebook to answer common questions about the rights of New York City's foster care teens regarding topics varying from clothing allowances and family visits, to adoption issues, college assistance, and immigration questions. Regardless of the fact that they are growing up in a system where every daily activity is somehow based on laws and regulations, foster youth are almost always completely unaware of their rights, and what the law requires for them. Based on New York State and City laws as well as regulations of the Administration for Children's Services in New York City, the Guidelines were published in 1996, and updated in 2002 by the

Legal Aid Society's Juvenile Rights Division, which still uses them as a resource for teens with whom they work.

While the Rights and Advocacy Guidelines were being created, Krebs and Pitcoff launched the Teen Mother Youth Advocacy Project, a direct service project for pregnant teens in the foster care system. The project began with the formation of a group of teen mothers that sat down and outlined the problems they experienced in the foster care system, with a focus emerging on the separation of the mothers from their babies following their birth while they were awaiting placement in mother-child foster homes or facilities. The group talked about bringing a class action lawsuit claiming that teens and their babies had a right to be placed together in safe homes along with the necessary services. However, it proved difficult to gather plaintiffs and to get the girls involved in the program to stay in touch while faced with changing placements and the struggles of motherhood. Instead, the newly formed Teen Mother Task Force worked with Krebs to create a report entitled Caring for our Children: Improving the Foster Care System, which was published in 1994 and outlined the problems with the system as seen by the teens, and recommendations for improvement.

Having worked on these different projects and having had direct contact with a variety of foster care teens as a result, Krebs and Pitcoff were able to observe the self-advocacy skills these teens developed during the course of their interactions and the way these skills empowered them to work towards improvements and changes in a system that used to seem so much bigger than they were. Realizing the importance of the development of these skills in teens, they set forth to examine the independent living programs currently available to teens in the foster care system to determine where change could be most helpful. They found that teens, who very infrequently attended the workshops offered, were being paid a stipend to attend which they received in many cases regardless of attendance. Expectations at these workshops were low, active participation was rarely expected, leaders would read aloud from pamphlets and brochures, and the topics of education and employment played second fiddle to issues of sexual safety and drug abuse. While those topics are certainly important, they do not warrant the entire focus of independent living programs and cannot be compared to the importance of employment and educational training which was so terribly lacking. In response to these discoveries, Youth Advocacy Center set forth on its most successful project to date – the creation of their Getting Beyond the System® Self-Advocacy Seminar and curriculum books.

System Resistance to Empowering Teens

“Our policy is to give stipends even to students who don’t always make the programs. They may have other issues going on. It wouldn’t be right not to give them their stipends; it would be discrimination”

- Social Worker (Krebs & Pitcoff, 2006, pp. 205-06).

Though the foster care system is painted as a safe zone for children and as having a focus on the best interests of children and their families, at the agency level the foster care system operates as a business. Filling beds and extending stays for foster kids increases agency budgets and ensures continuation of their contracts with state and local governments, without which they would go out of business. Assigning teens, the least likely age group to get adopted, a permanency goal of independent living can assure that the teen will remain in foster care until they age out of the system since attempts at reuniting them with their families will no longer be a priority. Keeping the kids in the system is a much more financially significant concern than what will happen to them once they leave (Krebs & Pitcoff, 2006, p.35).

Further, the established perceptions of what types of programming teens will respond to, and therefore regularly attend so as to further ensure funding, are skewed and extremely inflexible. The trilogy of food, money, and sex that agency workers seem to believe is the only key to guaranteeing attendance at independent living program workshops only reinforces the problem of low expectations that contributes to the eventual failure of so many foster teens. By removing these incentives and expecting teens to attend the Getting Beyond the System program of their own accord, the sense of accomplishment they feel is heightened, as is the sense that they have taken responsibility to initiate positive change in their lives – a lesson as important as any other skill they learn. However, for a system that has so consistently operated on a stipend-motivated basis, the idea of conducting independent living programs without these incentives creates a sense of fear that the teens will not show up and cost the agency funding.

Though many social services professionals can understand the value of a self-advocacy program for teens, most remain afraid to change the way things work. To incorporate these seminars as a required part of the independent living program without stipends, or free food, or discussions about sex can be daunting for some. However, those that have taken the risk have reaped the benefits and are seeing positive changes in the system and the futures of teens.

Self-Advocacy Model

Self-advocacy training unifies a series of major components including setting long- and short-term goals, research and analysis, understanding the goals of others and connecting them with your own goals, identifying allies and supporters, critical analysis of employment or education situations, identification of strengths and weaknesses, strategizing, oral and written presentation skills, dealing with rejection and setbacks, building upon success, and making adjustments to goals as necessary. These new skills can be applied in many facets of life where transitioning teens typically run into complications, such as getting a good job, dealing with teachers in an education setting to obtain support and help, and getting the medical attention they require.

Understanding the importance of both long- and short-term goals, and how to specify and plan for their achievement is a skill without which success is difficult or impossible. Learning about goals helps teens to create and maintain a focus for their lives, and to manage situations that arise for them as opposed to responding emotionally. Without this practice of goal-setting and analysis, it is even more difficult for the teens to determine the steps they need to take on the path that will lead eventually to the goals that they set.

Growing up in the foster care system, teens see the way that the system functions, but this is often the only exposure they get to the way that organizations operate and thrive. Understanding how organizations work is the first step towards figuring out how to navigate their ways into and through the organizations in order to achieve their goals. These skills are relevant everywhere from interviewing and obtaining jobs, to dealing with educational institutions and the other bureaucracies that play a major role in the early adult lives of foster teens. Learning how organizations work, and about the goals that organizations set for themselves, helps teens to align their goals with those of organizations and of other people in order to advocate for themselves. By crafting the way they present their objectives to others to show how both parties can benefit, the teens can effectively depersonalize issues and convince those around them to help them.

Teens in the foster care system are often treated like victims, and identified not as individuals but labeled as foster care kids. As they enter adulthood, most have never learned how to present themselves in a positive light, and how to take the experiences that have had and the hardships they have endured as a result of growing up in foster care and use them to their advantage in the adult world. By analyzing their strengths and learning to portray themselves as productive people who can be

assets to others, they not only gain a valuable skill, but gain the motivation and self-esteem required to succeed.

Apart from caseworkers, foster parents, and the staffs of the various facilities in which they reside, teens in the foster care system are not exposed to a variety of positive adult role models or adults who have similar experiences or interests who might serve as mentors or allies for them. By connecting them with adults through an informational interview process the teens are taught the value of networking and the willingness that some adults have to help teens trying to make positive changes in their lives. Many of the teens emerge from the interviews with mentors that last a lifetime, and all of them gain the understanding that adults can be resources, not just authority figures.

“The *Getting Beyond the System Seminar* prepared me to more realistically reach my goal of being a lawyer in two ways. First, the weekly meetings gave me the opportunity to improve my critical thinking skills and develop the sense of discipline necessary to succeed. In this environment, I learned how to solve problems and meet the needs of both parties involved. The second component of Getting Beyond the System Seminar that really opened doors for me was the informational interview. The informational interview helps you to see your goals more clearly. It gives you an honest account of what you are going to have to endure during your journey to meet your goals.”

- Tanya, GBS Graduate

After years of focusing on many different issues facing teenagers in the foster care system and tackling them in very different contexts, Betsy and Paul developed Getting Beyond the System® Self-Advocacy Seminar to deal directly with teenagers and help them achieve true independence. The program is a comprehensive educational program that teaches teens critical skills they require in order to succeed: self-advocacy concepts and skills. These skills are crucial to facing the challenges of being an independent adult, specifically educational needs and preparation for employment.

Youth Advocacy Center reaches hundreds of teens each year through meetings with a range of organizations dedicated to youth, and other outreach activities. Recruitment begins with one-hour, tailored presentations for teens in the at-risk population targeted by Getting Beyond the System® to familiarize them with the concepts of self-advocacy and informational interviews. The Beyond the System (2000) video, is shown during these presentations as a means of engaging teens and helping them to realize that there are ways they can take

control of their futures and make things happen. The video shows the true story of a young woman from foster care using her self-advocacy skills to learn how to reach her dream of becoming a graphic designer as contrasted with a young man without a plan for the future. The application and admissions process that follows is rigorous and results in small classes of 10-12 particularly dedicated students.

Youth Advocacy Center created a model for this training program that incorporates the principles of legal advocacy and education. The seminar is taught using the same Socratic Method applied in most law schools combined with a series of cases that portray teenagers facing real-life issues and struggles, and makes rigorous demands of its students – demands they are willing to meet, much to the surprise of those who learn about the program. By using materials that are relevant to their lives and keeping classes small, seminar leaders are able to keep kids engaged and involved in the classes. Students are required to attend weekly classes for one semester, participate actively in classes, complete written homework assignments for every class, and to complete the final project of Getting Beyond the System® – their informational interview set up in response to the area of interest that they declared at the start of the seminar. Every stated goal is treated with equal respect and importance regardless of how unrealistic it may seem to the facilitator, in order to fully communicate the message that their interests are important. Informational interviews with professionals in these fields can help students to realize that, while some of their specific career aspirations may be out of reach, that there are plenty of other options within the same field that would allow them to work at something that they are passionate about. This is a message much more effectively communicated by experienced professionals in the fields than other adult authority figures, or even the seminar facilitators themselves.

A typical class is a full two hours long and begins with a review of an extensive homework assignment given at the end of the previous class. These assignments generally involve reading case studies and then analyzing the cases and answering a series of questions that help apply the cases to the lives of the teens in the class. Those who have taught the seminar are often surprised at the time the teens put into the homework assignments, and the margin by which the quality of work improves from week to week. The classes progress with further discussion of more case studies and identification of key principles. Facilitators will discuss the case studies in the context of real world scenarios the teens may have already faced or may potentially face as they enter the working world. The teens are encouraged to question and engage in serious discussion and often

raise issues even the facilitators had not considered.

The program culminates in an informational interview, which is set up for each teen completing the program, in which they meet with a local professional in their specific area of interest to learn more about the field and about the pathways to their desired careers. The interviews take place at the professional's workplace for a period of twenty minutes, during which the students gain experience presenting themselves and their goals to a professional in the business community and begin the process of building contacts outside the system. These local contacts are crucial for their continued motivation and success. Many interviews last well over an hour, and result in positive reactions and responses from professionals who are highly impressed with the students and go on to stay in touch as long-term mentors, or even offer internships or job opportunities. By incorporating members of the community in the private sector, and connecting teens with professionals who have no incentive to help them other than a desire to share and reach out to them, the teens develop a deeper appreciation and respect for the interviewers and what they have to say. These connections and exposures are something they would never have access to within the foster care system, and are opportunities crucial to their success.

***Cities Across the U.S. Replicate
Getting Beyond the System***

“Above all else, this program has taught us to believe in ourselves. Whatever problems that appear, face them head-on and you will be that much stronger.”

- Jamal Pitt, GBS Graduate, Class Valedictorian,
Jamaica, Queens, Spring 2006

After teaching the seminars on-site at the Youth Advocacy Center, testing the program and finding great successes, it was time to expand the program to touch teens throughout New York City and, eventually, around the world. Today Youth Advocacy Center focuses on replication of the Getting Beyond the System® Self-Advocacy Seminar program by running trainings for various social service agencies, advocacy groups, and state workers. In this way, rather than only being able to conduct a limited number of seminars at one time, the methods can be taught to those already in charge of administering independent living programs to help them incorporate more successful and meaningful programs. One recent training brought together a group of social workers from the Administration of Children's Services in New York City, an agency created to protect children, help families in need, recruit foster parents, prepare them and matches them with foster children,

provide childcare and HeadStart programs, and support youth development by providing independent living programs and dealing with permanency planning.

Getting Beyond the System® training takes place over two days in a group setting. Social service professionals are introduced to the Socratic Method and the case method used in the seminar, and do group exercises to practice the technique and applying it to their own seminars. Throughout the two days, the workers read and discuss excerpts from some of the cases found in the course materials and learn how to get the teens to perform their own analysis and to develop their own understanding and real life applications of the situations studied.

In addition to the teaching methods incorporated in the Getting Beyond the System® program, there is a heavy emphasis on raising expectations and maintaining them throughout the course of the seminar. While this can be a difficult concept for many of these professionals to accept, and though they find the 80-90% attendance and graduation rates hard to grasp, these high expectations are a major driving and motivating factor for completion of the seminar. The culture of low expectations that exists for teens in the foster care system was found to be one of the largest contributing factors toward the lack of performance by these kids once they age out of the system. Upon completion of the seminar, participants are given the facilitator's guidebook as well as a copy of the student casebook used for the seminars and a copy of Getting Beyond The System's® educational video, used to help recruit students for the program. All these materials are issued with the hope and expectation that those participating in the training program have the desire and intention of replicating the program with their organization.

The partnership Youth Advocacy Center has now established with Administration of Children's Services will allow the program to expand directly into the foster care system and reach a broader base of kids, while improving the independent living programs the foster care system currently provides. Follow-up training will be provided for additional Administration of Children's Services workers who will become program facilitators. With this direct connection to the foster care system, Getting Beyond the System® will be able to gain system-based success and recognition which will promote the program's further expansion in New York City, and will change the lives of many more young people.

Further Expansion and Future Plans

“Getting Beyond the System has been a great experience for me. I feel that all the youth in the system should attend this workshop. I learned a lot of useful information that I can apply to my everyday life.”

-Ashley Davis, Graduate of GBS Fall 2004

In addition to its partnership with the Administration for Children's Services, Youth Advocacy Center has collaborated with The Door Legal Services Center and Safe Space, which are both located in New York City. Safe Space has launched a large-scale replication and continues to conduct seminars. In June of 2006, they held their first graduation ceremony – an important part of the program that demonstrates the value of the achievement for the students and connects them with former graduates who are out leading successful lives as a result of their personal experiences with Getting Beyond the System®. Recognition of achievement and validation for hard work is an important piece of the learning and growing process that is unfortunately absent in most cases in the context of the foster care system, and this positive reinforcement encourages kids to continue to strive for their goals.

Beyond its expansion throughout New York City, Youth Advocacy Center's Getting Beyond the System® program has already been replicated in major cities such as Philadelphia and Detroit. During the summer of 2006 trainings were held for professionals in the Baltimore area to begin replication of the program as well. Further expansion into Hartford is planned for the near future. The program's national recognition, and interest in the training program from various areas of the country, served as a great encouragement, but the recent international buzz that has begun was an even greater unexpected success. The last training offered received applications from organizations in Israel and Afghanistan from programs aimed at helping teens transition into successful adulthood.

Getting Beyond the System empowers teens to take charge of their futures in ways they've never experienced. The power to take responsibility helps them gather the strength to change direction from the path they're placed on, to the path that they choose. With enough time, funding, and successful expansion of the program, foster teens across the nation could be granted a new chance for success.

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